

## DAILY TRIBUNE by DOUG ALFT

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*Stephen Horvath, 4-H Development Agent with the University Extension-Wood County, at his desk Tuesday in his Wood county Courthouse office in Wisconsin Rapids.*

### **Reservist seeks ways to connect families, schools**

WISCONSIN RAPIDS -- Stephen Horvath, 41, of Stevens Point, is the Wood County 4-H Youth Development Agent and a Reserve Seabee. He recently spent 10 months on active duty with the Naval Mobil Construction Battalions 25/40 as a Navy Reservist.

Horvath was activated in January 2006, and after training at Port Hueneme in California, he went to Kuwait then Iraq.

"There are 12 Navy Reserve Battalions that have been rotating to Iraq. We knew a year ahead of time that we would be going," Horvath said.

Now that he has returned, he is working on making life easier for children of men and women who are deployed.

"The first school function I attended with my family upon my return was report card pick-up day. I was surprised to learn only one teacher knew that I had been deployed," he said.

"Looking back, I realize I could have let the school know of my deployment, but as I prepared to report for duty and get all of our family's other affairs in order, I simply overlooked it," he said.

"While I was gone, my son's grades went down. I think if his teachers had known about the situation at home, he could have received help," Horvath said. "There is clearly a need to connect our public schools with the families who are making great sacrifices through their military service."

To that end, he is working on a program that will connect military families and their schools. He recently wrote an article titled "Operation: Inform the Teacher." It was printed in Wisconsin School News.

He also is working on another program called "Operation: Military Kids," a partnership between the National 4-H Headquarters, the U.S. Army Child and Youth Services and other organizations. He recently attended a conference on this partnership in Kansas City, Kan.

"It's tough taking care of things at home when you are halfway around the world. It's a very helpless feeling at times," he said. Families at home need all the help they can get. Three members of his battalion were killed in Iraq, two fathers and one mother.

It takes time to get acclimated when returning home.

"One minute you're thinking of where you are, and then you're thinking of where you were," he said. "It took a while to get back in the groove."

While in Iraq, Horvath worked on an ongoing project of such secrecy that he signed a 30-year confidentiality

agreement.

"In 28 years, I'll be able to tell everyone what I was doing," he said with a smile.

After college, Horvath joined the Peace Corps and served from 1991 to 1994 in Benin, West Africa. When he returned, he brought his wife, Justine, with him. They have been married 14 years and have four children: Joseph, 13; Eleanor, 12; Nina, 10; and Emmanuelle, 5.

He was a teacher in Chicago for five years, then worked for an electric utility for five years before coming back into education through 4-H.

He joined the Seabee Reserves in 1996 and one weekend a month attends drills at Fort McCoy.

"My family has a history of serving this country," he said. His dad was a Marine and other relatives also have served.

The average age of Seabees is late 30s.

"We are older men who have worked in the trades or have a skill," he said. Horvath specializes in carpentry and masonry.

"We bring our skills to the table and learn about the military. Other reserve units learn a trade while serving."

When he returned from Iraq, he was deployed in California and flew home to Mosinee where his family met him.

"It was a lot different from some of the big homecomings," he said.

"As difficult as it was to leave my family, I am proud of what we accomplished, proud to have taken our turn. This war relies more on the National Guard and Reserves than any other war, except maybe Vietnam," he said.

"Time away from home and family is time you never get back, but that's part of the deal. When you're in the Reserves, there is always the possibility that you will be called to war," he said.

He will continue working on connecting schools and families.

"There is clearly a need to connect our public schools with the families who are making great sacrifices through their military service," Horvath said.

Nancy Quick is a correspondent and former lifestyle editor for the Daily Tribune. Used with permission of the Daily Tribune, Wisconsin Rapids.